

# Growing More Than Trees in Randolph County: Hendons Continue Commitment to Stewardship

By Coleen Vansant, Information Manager, Alabama Forestry Commission

Tommy (left) and John Hendon stand under one of the sawtooth oaks they planted eight years ago. The trees are now around 30 feet tall.

Over the years one of the favorite things about my job has become visiting landowners on their property for the interviews for the feature story of this magazine. I have always felt so welcome and I really enjoy touring the property in a very relaxed atmosphere, not so much talking to the landowner but letting the landowner talk to me. Just asking a few questions now and then to make sure I have the facts right. As much as I enjoy these visits, unfortunately for the majority of them it is the only visit I have the privilege to experience. Seldom do I get to return to see the growth and changes that have been made over a period of years.

Recently however, I had the pleasure of “re-visiting” a landowner after many years. I really enjoyed seeing the property again and seeing what changes had taken place in seven years. But the thing that I was the most impressed and delighted with was the change that had *not* taken place . . . there has been no decline in this landowner’s enthusiasm for what he was

doing and his commitment to his stewardship ethic.

I first had the honor and privilege of visiting Tommy and John Hendon on their farm in Randolph County in 1997 when I did an interview for a “Hidden TREASURE” story for this magazine. A year later I was there again with the Commission’s video crew during the filming of his video when Tommy won the Helene Mosley Award for the Northeast Region. His son John had just graduated from high school the year before.

According to Tommy, he began in the late 1980’s looking for land to purchase for himself and his young son to hunt on. For decades local hunting lands had been open to almost anyone for the asking, but in recent years this same land was now either being closed to hunting or was being leased to out-of-town paying clients. He and John looked in earnest for a piece of property that they could afford to buy and manage for the purpose of hunting.

In 1990 they finally found what they had been looking for — an 85-acre tract of land near Wedowee in Randolph County. Three years later they acquired an adjoining 42 acres, and this year Tommy purchased an additional 40 acres. He also purchased a one-acre easement for a total of 168 acres.

## ***Making Every Bit Count***

Timber and wildlife are the two management objectives and the Hendons carry out a very intensive forest management program. Their goal is to create a “stair-step” forest with all age levels and species of trees from 50 acres of 4-year-old pine to mature natural stands. Tommy has always conducted a prescribed burning program and is currently working in a three-year rotation for burning. He has thinned his natural pine stand twice for a total of about 7-8 acres. Tommy and John have also installed access roads throughout the property and have experimented with both fertilization and pruning.

“We don’t let anything go to waste,” says Tommy. When Hurricane Opal



blazed through several years ago, the Hendons were left with extensive hardwood damage. Tommy and John salvaged around 150 loads of firewood and barbecue wood. They also salvaged around 15,000 board feet of logs, which were used to build a cabin on the property. After salvaging everything they could, the next year they had the land sprayed with Arsenal, prescribe burned for site prep, and then had 32,000 trees hand planted. Each year the pair cuts around 75-100 loads of firewood. This year they have already cut about 35 loads.

## Wildlife a Priority

Aside from no material going to waste, no space goes to waste either. When the planting crew missed several rows while planting the last pine seedlings four years ago, the Hendons turned the open space into a wildlife food plot. They have planted sawtooth oak, crabapple, and Chinese chestnut on the space, and this year planted corn, watermelons, and cantaloupe for the deer and other wildlife.

They have other food plots, one that is about three acres on a power line right-

of-way that they have planted in clover, and this next year they are going to try biologic (similar to rape). Also on this food plot are several sawtooth oaks of which the Hendons are very proud. The trees are eight years old and are approximately 30 feet tall. Tommy says he and John have fertilized the trees twice a year and the extra effort has paid off with growth and acorn production. They have also planted a small grove of crabapple trees. A corn feeder on the site this summer kept the deer coming up so that the family could enjoy watching them.

On another large food plot they have planted crabapples, Bartlett and Keiffer pears, and Yates and Black Arkansas apples. On the upper portion of the site they plant wheat, oats, and rye, and on the lower end they plant rape.

About ten years ago the pair planted bicolor lespedeza around the edges of the property. At this particular plot Tommy tells a wonderful wildlife story. He said he watched a couple of deer knocking the Yates apples from the tree. As soon as they would hit the ground a fox would come from the edge of the woods, steal an apple, return to the woods edge, then hold it between his paws and eat it.

Over the years they have constructed and installed bat houses, squirrel nesting boxes, wood duck boxes, bluebird houses, and hung purple martin gourds. They have several wildlife observation towers on the food plots – the latest being built off-site in sections from wood (studs, lumber, and door) cut from the property. The sections were then transported to the farm where they were rejoined.



Photo by Coleen Vansant

*Deer are enjoying the cantaloupe and watermelon planted on one of the food plots.*



Photo by Coleen Vansant

*This sign was built by Tommy and John.*

Tommy smiles when he says that when he and John first began managing the property there were no turkeys. This year they killed their first two and now the turkeys are nesting and raising young on the property, making all of the hard work over the years worthwhile.

## Helping Others

The Hendon property was certified as a TREASURE Forest in 1993. In 1996 they were awarded the Tree Farmer of the Year Award, and in 1998 they received the prestigious Helene Mosley Award.

Since then, the Hendons have continued to be actively involved in the TREASURE Forest program locally and statewide. Tommy is a long-time member of the Randolph County Forestry Planning Committee and currently serves as its chairman. He is a member and past president of the county TREASURE Forest Association chapter and is also a member of the Alabama TREASURE

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Photo by Coleen Vansant

Forest Owners Association statewide organization.

Because of his outstanding work as a TREASURE Forest landowner, Tommy has been called on to mentor other landowners in their forest management activities. Several years ago I was a witness to his commitment. Tommy and Clay County TREASURE Forest owner Don East were in Blount County at a trade show manning a TREASURE Forest Association booth. They talked to a local gentleman about his land for a few minutes and then both of them left to go with the man to look at his property. According to Tommy, "I like helping a guy out now and then."

Along with mentoring, education is a big part of the Hendons' landowner ethic. Many times over the years they have hosted landowner groups and school children on their property for tours and outdoor classroom programs.

Although now seven years later John has grown into a big, tall handsome young man of 27 years, his interest in conservation and forestry has been a long-time commitment. When in high school he won many honors including the Alabama FFA Forest Management Award

*Top: This wildlife observation tower was built by Tommy and John, partly from materials harvested from the farm. Right: Natural pine stand has been thinned and burned.*

in 1995 and the Alabama FFA Wildlife Management Award in 1996. He was the recipient of the Southwire Corporation's Community Environmental Award, the 1996 Governor's Youth Conservationist Award, and the 1997 Alabama FFA Soil Conservation Award. Also in 1996 he was the winner of the National Wildlife Management Award.

It was so good to visit the Hendons again and see the changes that have been made on their property and the growth that has taken place. But the best thing to witness again was the enthusiasm they still have for their stewardship ethics and their commitment to the TREASURE Forest program. These values have grown along with the trees and the wildlife.

Hopefully one day in the future we will see John making his way to the front of the auditorium to accept his Helene Mosley Award. He has purchased 84 acres of land near his father's farm and is currently in the process of nurturing it to a TREASURE.

One of the mottos of the TREASURE Forest program has always been that we are "keepers of the land for the next generation." Tommy Hendon has passed his love of the land to his son and now is in the process of passing that same ethic to another generation – he already talks about bringing his nine month-old grandson to the farm. 🌲



Photo by Coleen Vansant